



Customer Focus

The Nature Conservancy has identified the Kissimmee Valley and other portions of the Lake Okeechobee drainage as critical to sustaining the habitat of a broad range of threatened and endangered plant and animal species, including the Florida panther, whooping crane, wood stork, and many others. In addition, management of the Lake Okeechobee drainage has a profound effect on the health of the lake, Everglades ecosystem, Indian River Lagoon and Caloosahatchee estuary, which receive overflows from the lake during times of high water.

Unlike many areas of Florida, agriculture remains an important industry in the Kissimmee Valley and the Fisheating Creek drainage areas. Cattle and citrus are primary products along with some row crops. In the past, agriculture has been identified as contributing significant nutrient loads to the Kissimmee River and Lake Okeechobee. In addition, the channelization of the Kissimmee River and the ditching and draining of wetlands throughout the basin have drastically reduced water storage within the basin. This channelization causes flooding downstream; an unnatural hydroperiod for the Everglades water system; reduced water quality for downstream users; and a loss of wildlife habitat in the basin.

The FPP, in partnership with the Nature Conservancy, has recently purchased a 1,900 acre easement in this area to demonstrate how the restoration of wetlands and ranching can work hand-in-hand to improve water quality and protect wildlife. The 1,900-acre XL Ranch contains some of Florida's most threatened and endangered species, including the wood stork, whooping crane, Florida panther, and Audubon crested cara-cara. By allowing cattle to graze in these areas, the natural grass habitat, which is home to these species, is maintained.

The XL Ranch in Highlands County represents the first easement transaction that has occurred as part of the Nature Conservancy's new pilot project, named Florida Lands and Outstanding Waters (FLOW). Through this acquisition, NRCS and the Nature Conservancy hope to demonstrate that maintaining agricultural economic viability can result in improved water management, water quality, and wildlife habitat in the Kissimmee basin.

Farmland Protection Program Florida Summary

Overview The USDA Farmland Protection Program (FPP) helps farmers keep their productive land in agriculture. The program assists States, Tribes, local governments and non-profit organizations by purchasing conservation easements for the purpose of limiting conversion to non-agricultural uses. NRCS provides up to 50% of the easement cost to the cooperating entity, which acquires, manages, and enforces the easement. Landowners participate voluntarily, and protected farms remain in private ownership. Every protected farm operates under a conservation plan approved by the local Conservation District. Nationally, over \$52 million have been obligated to state and local entities since establishment of the program in 1996. Proposals were accepted in 1996, 1997, 1998, and 2001.

Accomplishments In Florida, \$1.7 million in FPP financial assistance funds have been awarded to protect over 5,500 acres of valuable agricultural land on three working farm and ranch operations. Preserving large tracts, which not only preserve open space, but also protect water quality and wildlife habitat is the driving force behind Florida's Farmland Protection Program. Since 1996, FPP has partnered with three local farmland protection programs since the program's inception, including: St. John's River Water Management District, the City of Gainesville, and the Nature Conservancy. The demand for FPP far exceeds available funds. In fiscal year 2001, Florida alone requested over \$9.6 million dollars to protect 22,622 acres on 12 parcels, over one-third of the FPP funds available to the nation.

Outlook In recent decades, the promise of a mild winter climate has invited many retirees and others to Florida. In 1950, Florida with a population of less than three million, was the twentieth largest state in the United States. By 2000, its population has grown to almost 16 million. This five-fold increase has made Florida the fourth most populated state in the nation. Currently, the statewide population is growing a rate of more than 750 people per day. Unfortunately, one of the consequences to this population explosion has been the conversion of vegetable cropland and citrus groves to non-agricultural uses. According to the 1997 National Resources Inventory, Florida is losing cropland at a rate of almost 246,000 acres per year. This amounts to almost 10 percent of the State's cropland per year.

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*Photo courtesy of :
The South Florida Water
Management District.*

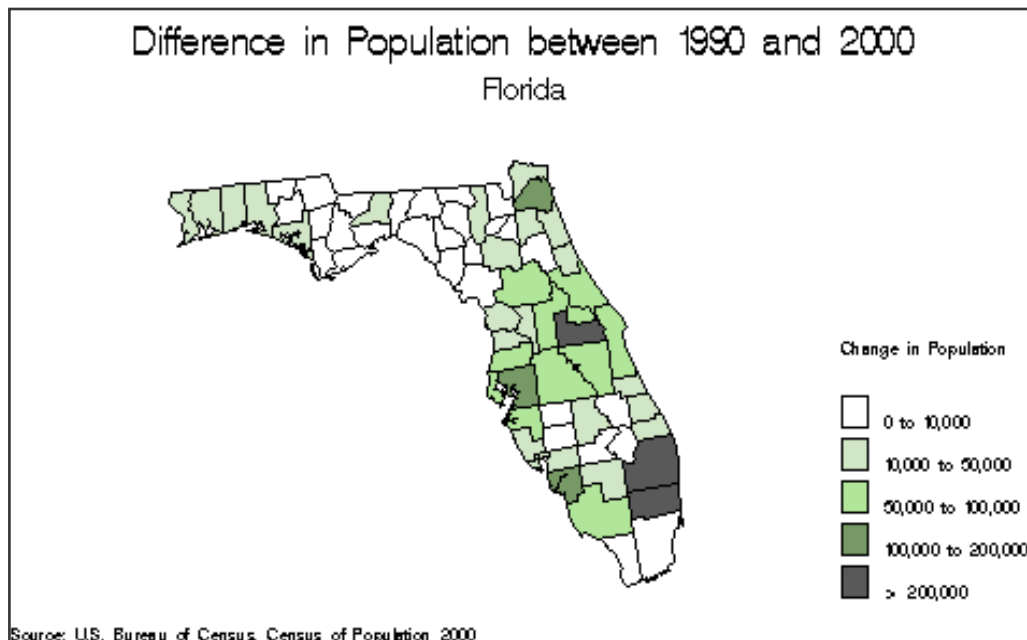
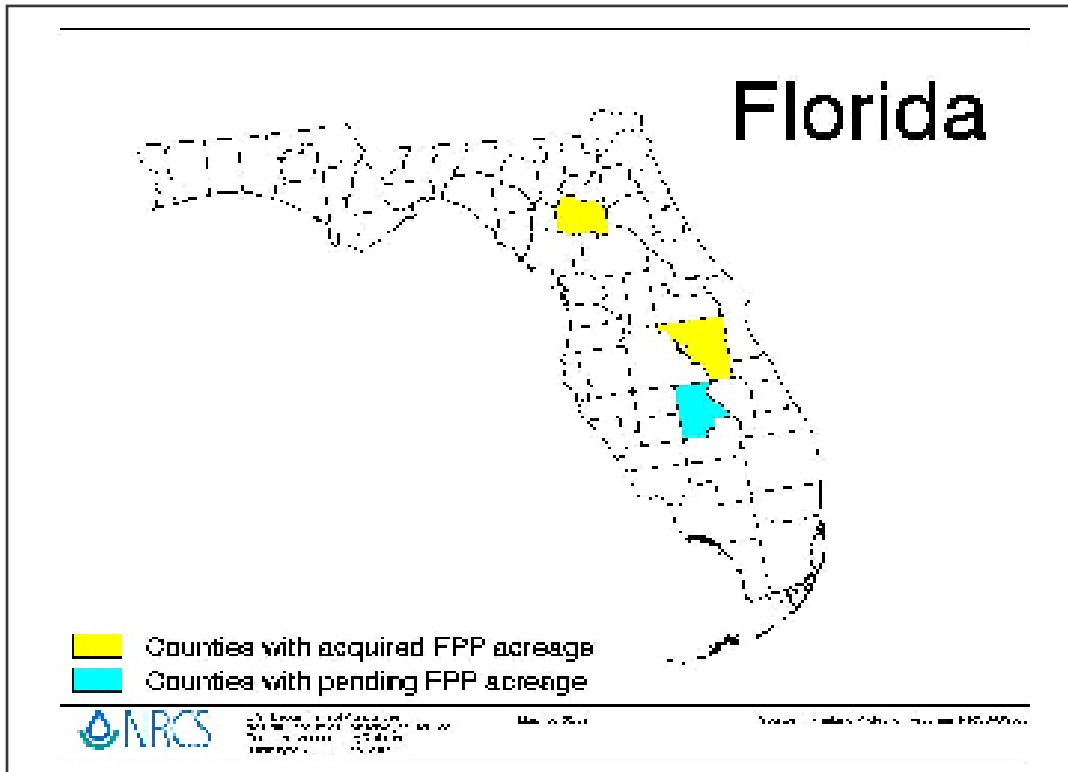
**Farmland Protection
Program
Florida Easements
(As of December 2001)**

County: Alachua
Acres: 1,777
Total Easement Cost:
 \$1,510,450
Average per acre: \$850
Federal Payment Amount:
 \$600,000
Percentage: 40%

County: Highlands
Acres: 3,730
Total Easement Cost:
 \$3,170,000
Average per acre: \$850
Federal Payment Amount:
 \$700,200
Percentage: 22%

County: Osceola
Acres: 1,932
Total Easement Cost:
 \$962,136
Average per acre: \$498
Federal Payment Amount:
 \$432,961
Percentage: 45%

Florida Totals:
Acres: 7,439
Total Easement Cost:
 \$5,642,586
Average per acre: \$759
Federal Payment Amount:
 \$1,733,161
Percentage: 31%



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